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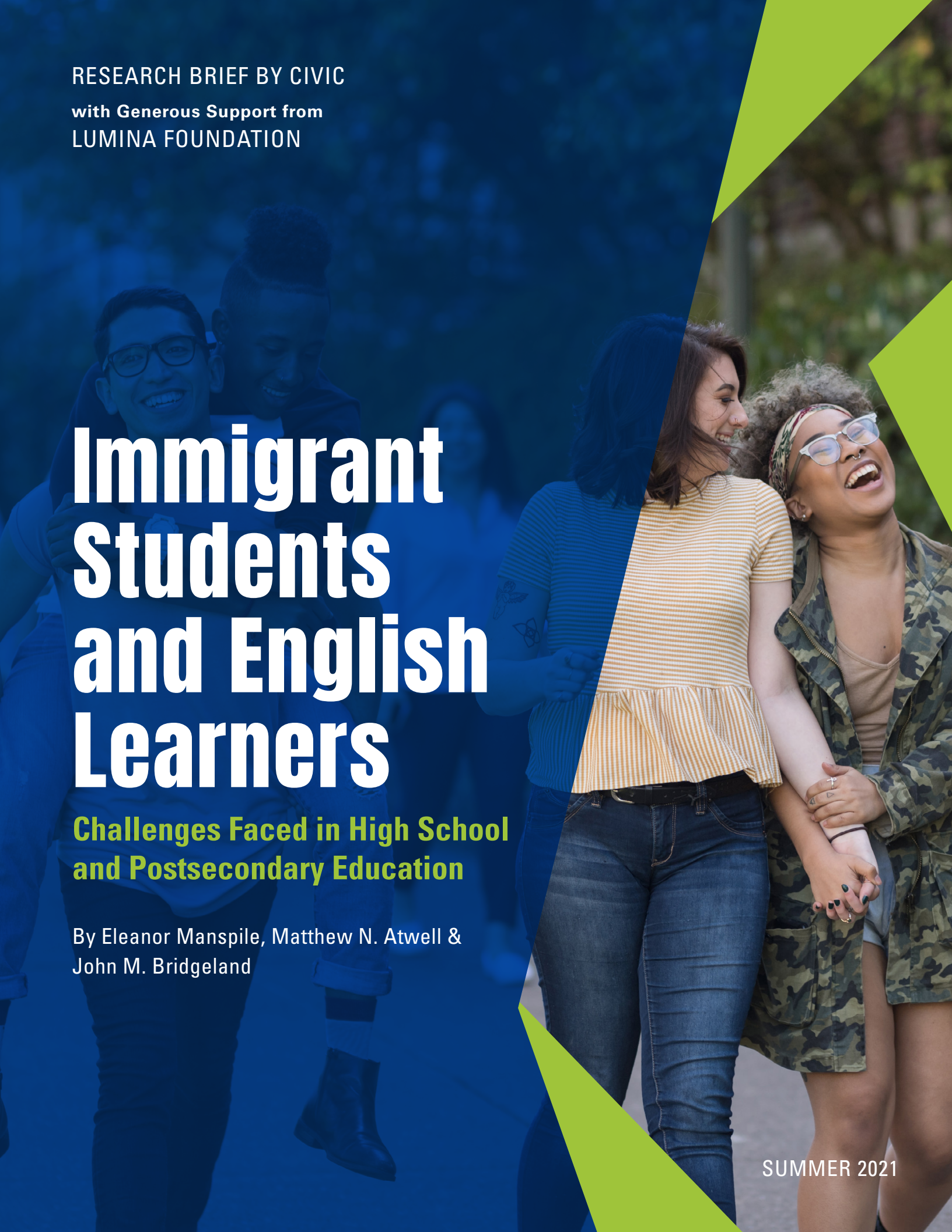

Immigrant Students and English Learners

Challenges Faced in High School and Postsecondary Education

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Executive Summary

Immigrants are a vital part of America and help form the backbone of our economy and communities. Too often, however, immigrants are not given the same educational opportunities or necessary attention as their native-born peers in high school, leading to lower high school graduation rates and postsecondary attainment.

Immigrant students face added challenges to education such as navigating new systems, family responsibilities, and financial pressures. Furthermore, the COVID-19 pandemic has disproportionately affected people of color, immigrants, and low-income populations in the United States. This means existing barriers for many immigrant students, such as the digital divide and langauge skills, have increased exponentially.

To reduce the education gaps between immigrant students and their peers and boost postsecondary attainment, policymakers and educators must rise to the challenge of creating a more equitable education system.

Policymakers Can:

- Increase Title III funding, especially given the challenges amplified by COVID-19 for English Learners and immigrant students, and as districts and states innovate and report on what is effective in boosting outcomes for these students.
- Provide clearer guidance on native language assessments.
- Increase pathways to teaching for untraditional candidates in their own communities through Grow Your Own programs.
- Improve data collection by disaggregating high school graduation rates by immigrant status and postsecondary attainment rates by first- or second-generation status.

Educators Can:

- Practice culturally responsive education to create a safer and more meaningful environment for students.
- Integrate social and emotional learning and mental health services into school systems.
- Expand quality dual language programs to teach academic materials to students in both English and their native language.
- Fully prepare all students for the rigors of postsecondary coursework through greater access to college-level classes in high school.

Authors' Note: Throughout this paper, we define "immigrant students" consistent with the Migration Policy Institute. MPI uses the terms "foreign-born" and "immigrant" interchangeably and defines them as a person with no U.S. citizenship at birth, including naturalized citizens, lawful permanent residents, refugees and asylees, persons on certain temporary visas, and the undocumented (Batalova et al., 2020).

Consistent with the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) and the Every Student Succeeds Act, "English Language Learners" are defined as students who: are aged 3 through 21; are enrolled in an elementary or secondary school; and whose difficulties in speaking, reading, writing or understanding English may be sufficient to deny the individuals the ability to meet State academic standards, successfully achieve in classrooms where the language of instruction is English, and to participate fully in society (Non-regulatory Guidance, 2016).

Introduction

Immigrants are a vital part of America and help form the backbone of our economy and communities.

In 2019, there were 44.9 million immigrants in the U.S. from diverse backgrounds with Mexico, China, and India as the top three countries of origin, making up nearly 14 percent of the U.S. population. In the U.S. labor force, the percentage of immigrants has been steadily increasing, rising from about 5 percent in 1970 to its current rate of 17 percent, or 28.6 million people.

Over a third (35 percent) of foreign-born workers work in management, business, science, and arts. Another 23 percent work in the service industry (Batalova et al., 2020). The immigrant population is growing so rapidly that it is projected that 88 percent of the U.S. population will be comprised of immigrants and their children by 2065 (Budiman, 2020).

Immigrants also account for a significant number of new business owners. Between 1995 and 2012, the share of employer firms started by immigrants grew from 16 to 25 percent.[1] Businesses that are less than 5 years old create nearly all of the net new jobs in the American economy, including fueling net new job creation during economic downturns (Hatiwanger et al., 2013). Moreover, the Migration Policy Institute reports that by 2027 there will be a shortage of 8 million workers in the U.S. after baby boomers retire. Immigrant workers are expected to help fill this gap (Batalova & Fix, 2019).

Too often, however, immigrants are not given the same educational opportunities or attention as their native-born peers in high school, leading to lower high school graduation rates and postsecondary attainment. In today's economy, postsecondary credentials are closely tied to future success. The Alliance for Excellent Education reports that of the 11.6 million jobs added to the economy since 2010, 99 percent went to candidates with some level of postsecondary education (*The Graduation Effect*, n.d.).

One major limitation to researching immigrant students in the United States is limited population data at the high school level. The National Center for Education Statistics reports an annual Adjusted Cohort Graudation Rate (ACGR) for English Learners, but not immigrants. Throughout this report, we use data on immigrant students wherever possible, but also rely on English Learner data to best approximate the immigrant student population.

More than 60 percent of immigrant adults who do not hold postsecondary credentials are English (Language) Learners (ELs). Additionally, in 2019, 46 percent of immigrants over the age of 5 were Limited English Proficient (LEP), and they accounted for over 80 percent of the U.S.' LEP population (Batalova et al., 2021). This shows significant overlap in the immigration student and English Learner populations. Nevertheless, 72 percent of ELs aged 5 to 17 in U.S. public schools were born in the United States and are U.S. citizens, thus we recognize using English Learner data is not an exact measure for immigrant student achievement (Bialik et al., 2018).

In the U.S., there are about 1.5 million English Learners aged 14 to 21. Like immigrants, this population is very diverse—15 percent white, 5 percent Black, 37 percent Hispanic, 18 percent Asian, and 25 percent 'other.' About 13 percent of English learners aged 14 to 18 years old are not enrolled in a secondary or postsecondary school (as compared to 6 percent of non-ELs). In addition, over half (57 percent) of non-enrolled ELs aged 16 to 21 are unemployed. Among 19- to 21-year-olds, this number is still 40 percent, highlighting the untapped potential in postsecondary education and the workforce among English Learners (Velez et al., 2016).

The COVID-19 pandemic is widening gaps between immigrant and native-born students and English Learners and non-English Learners. The pandemic has disproportionately affected people of color, immigrants, and low-income populations in the United States. In many instances, this means that existing barriers, such as the digital divide and language skills, have increased exponentially. Immigrant students were already more likely to live in lower-income households than their native-born peers and the pandemic is expected to exacerbate these circumstances.

These added hardships from the pandemic and learning loss from virtual

[1] Statement of Sari Pekkala Kerr for the United States House Committee on the Budget, hearing on "Building a More Dynamic Economy: The Benefit of Immigration," 2019.

and hybrid learning may further set immigrant students behind their native-born peers in educational attainment. Undergraduate freshman enrollment fell 13.1 percent across the country in the fall of 2020, as campuses and students continued to deal with the COVID-19 pandemic. Much of this decline was carried by two-year public institutions, where enrollments rates dropped 21 percent, or by 207,500 students (*Fall 2020*, 2020).

This enrollment decline at smaller, less competitive postsecondary institutions is likely to continue and may also disproportionately affect immigrant students, especially the undocumented (Redden, 2020). The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) data show that nonresident aliens comprised only 0.03 percent of enrollment in public 4-year institutions and less than 0.02 percent in public 2-year institutions in the fall of 2018 (*Table 306.50*, 2019).

In January 2021, the Common Application reported reduced applications from first-generation and low-income students from previous years. First-generation applications declined by 3 percent (Jaschik, 2021). Financial aid requests also declined by 11.4 percent, as did Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) completion at high schools with high proportions of low-income, Black, and Hispanic students (Busta, 2021). These declining numbers reveal the lack of support, such as in testing for first-generation students who want to attend a postsecondary institution.

To create a more equitable society and for the future of the country, the gaps in immigrant students' education must be addressed by educators and policymakers. The following research brief outlines the current state of immigrant students' high school graduation and postsecondary attainment rates, specific challenges this population face in education, and policy recommendations to address these challenges.

High School Achievement & Challenges[2]

The link between high school graduation and postsecondary success is clear.

One study from Boston Public Schools shows three early indicators are highly predictive of both earning and not earning a bachelor's degree within seven years of high school graduation: 1) an attendance rate of 94 percent or higher during four years of high school; 2) a GPA of 2.7 or higher; and 3) completing the required set of courses for admission to state university systems and taking an AP class. In fact, the odds of achieving a four-year degree increase from 10 percent to 84 percent as the number of these indicators a student meets moves from zero to three (Atwell et al., 2019).

Immigrant Data at High School Level

Many states do not disaggregate high school graduation rates by immigrants, but Texas reports that the 2019 public school graduation rate for its immigrant students was 73.1 percent (4,938 students). They also report that one in five dropped out, totaling 988 students. This is among the lowest graduation rates and highest dropout percentages for all subgroups in Texas Public School's class of 2019. The graduation rate was slightly higher for seniors who were English Learners (75.9 percent), and even higher for those who were English Learners at any point in 9th through 12th grade (78.0 percent). Those in bilingual programs had a 79.7 graduation rate (*Grade 9*, 2020). The rate discrepancies between immigrant students and English Learners in Texas highlight the need to collect better high school graduation rate data disaggregated by immigrant students at both the state and federal levels.

Although NCES does not disaggregate data by immigrant status, the U.S. Census Bureau's School Enrollment data offers some insights that show an education gap between native-born and foreign-born students. The data show that 80.5 percent of children aged 14 to 15 years were enrolled in high school in 2019, compared to 78.1 percent of foreign-born children in the same age group. This disparity grows within the 16 to 17 years old age category: 89.5 percent of all children were enrolled in high school in 2019, compared to just 81.6 percent of foreign-born children in this age group. Lastly, 71.9 percent of foreign-born citizens 55 years old and older are high school graduates, compared to an overall rate of 89 percent in the same age category (*School Enrollment*, 2021).

English Learners' High School Graduate Rate Trends

A 2016 report highlighted the need to increase the high school graduation rates of English Learners for the nation to reach its postsecondary attainment goals, as well as to ensure greater access to a diverse range of postsecondary options and improve persistence rates for underserved populations (Balfanz et al.).

English Learners' high school graduation rate increased 0.9 percentage point to 69.2 percent in 2019. This leaves EL students behind the overall national graduation rate of 85.8 percent and 17.9 percentage points below their non-English Learner peers; it is the third lowest graduation rate of all subgroups. The graph below depicts the lagging graduation rates of EL students compared to their Black and Hispanic peers, and the overall national average since 2015.

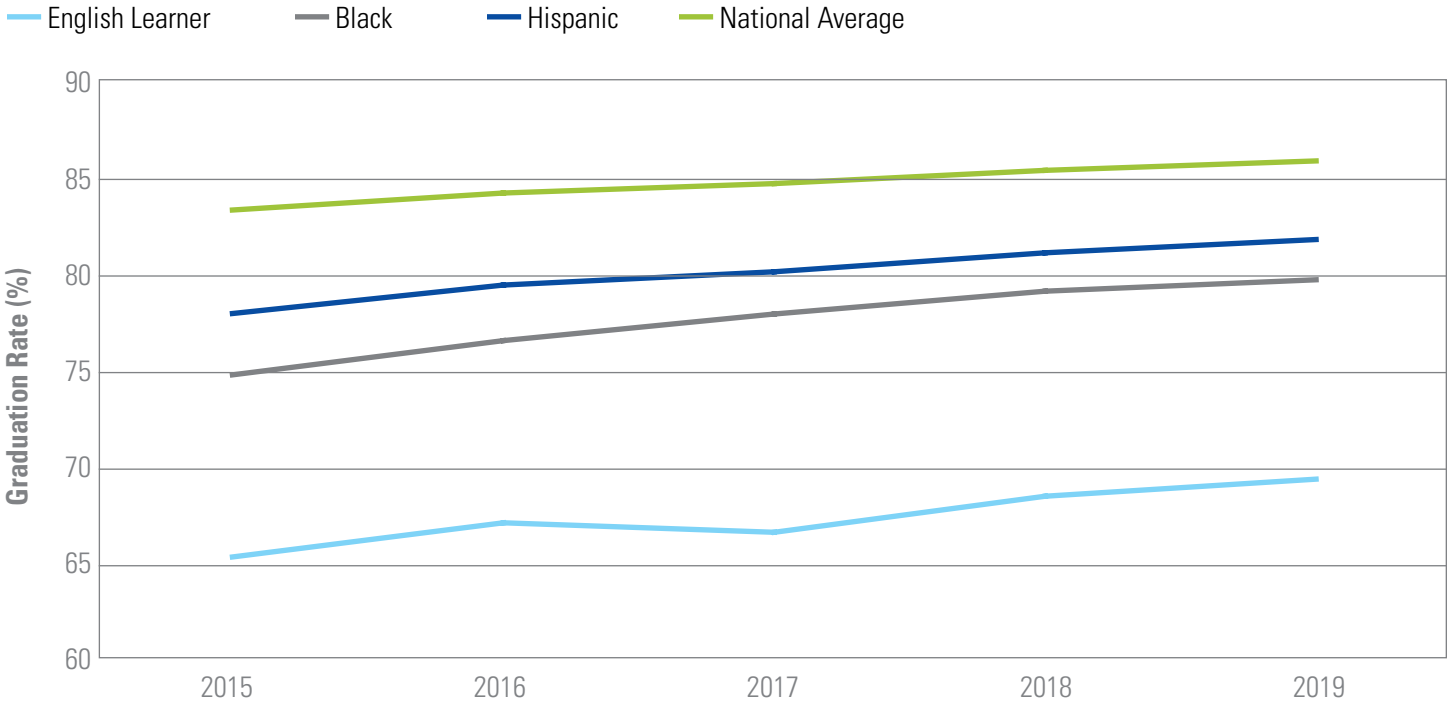
Challenge: Language Barriers

For many students, an adult guide through the process of high school graduation and postsecondary options is critical to navigating academic success. Immigrant and English Learner students often do not have this luxury. Crucial information such as graduation requirements, financial aid offerings, and college application instructions are not translated into native languages.

Thirty-one states had increases of at least 1.0 percentage point since 2018, but there is still much progress that needs to be made: the on-time graduation rate for EL students is at or below 75 percent in 38 states and D.C. Graduation rate gaps for English Learners range from a low of 1.9

[2] For the purpose of this literature and landscape review, when discussing high school data, we will mostly draw on data about English Learners, as data is not disaggregated by immigrant students at the high school level. Where available at the postsecondary level, data on immigrant students will be used.

HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATION RATE TRENDS BY SUBGROUP, 2015–2019



Data from the National Center for Education Statistics.

percentage points in South Carolina and New Mexico to a high of 51.2 percentage points in New York (NCES, 2021).

The number of English Learners is growing. The percentage of public-school students in the United States who are ELs increased from 8.1 percent, or 3.8 million students, in the fall of 2000 to 9.6 percent, or 4.9 million students, in the fall of 2016, representing an increase of more than 1 million students. In 2016, nine states had rates of ELs over 10 percent, and the top three states had ELs comprise over 15 percent of their public-school students—California at 20.2 percent, Texas at 17.2 percent, and Nevada at 15.9 percent (*English Language Learners*, 2020).

Non-Graduate English Learners

ELs comprise disproportionate rates of the nation's non-graduates. In 2019, they made up 16.1 percent of all students that failed to graduate in 4 years, even though they were just 7.4 percent of the 2019 cohort.

ELs most commonly live in urban areas, where they accounted for 14 percent of all students in the fall of 2016, followed by suburban areas (9.3 percent), towns (6.5 percent), and rural areas (3.8 percent). The vast majority (76.6 percent) of ELs' home language is Spanish, followed by Arabic (2.6 percent), Chinese (2.1 percent) and Vietnamese (1.6 percent) (ibid.).

Challenge: Unclear Path to Graduation

English Learners often face an unclear path to high school graduation. Schools may fail to give them good counseling about their graduation requirements and place these students in classes that are remedial or non-credit-bearing (Sugarman, 2017). By the time the student advances into credited courses, they are behind their peers and do not have enough credits to graduate within four years, often leading to the decision to drop out.

States with high percentages of non-graduates who are English Learners are geographically diverse—English Learners comprise over 25 percent of non-graduates in California, Massachusetts, New Mexico, and Virginia. Each of these states has significant proportions of English Learners, as well as Hispanic students (*English Language Learners*, 2020). The need to focus on the high school graduation and postsecondary attainment rates of ELs' and immigrants is heightened as their graduation rates remain low, despite a growing number of K-12 students.

Although immigrants comprise 11 percent of Americans aged 19 to 24 years, they make up 23 percent of those in the U.S in this age group without a high school degree. This disparity also exists among immigrants aged 25 and older, who make up 17 percent of the U.S. population, but comprise 37 percent of those with less than a high school degree (McHugh & Morawski, 2015).

Undocumented Immigrants and Newcomers in High School

About 98,000 undocumented students graduate from American high schools each year. Forty-four percent of those students live in California and Texas (Zong & Batalova, 2019). According to a Center for American Progress report, however, undocumented youth disproportionately drop out of high school (40 percent), compared to their U.S.-born peers (8 percent). There are many factors contributing to this gap, including financial burdens, the fear of revealing one's legal status, and a lack of support towards postsecondary education goals (Perez, 2014).

An estimated 154,000 students aged 12 to 21 immigrated to the U.S. annually between 2010 and 2014. These students who enter secondary education systems as adolescents are known as "newcomers," and they face additional barriers to education compared to immigrants who arrived at a younger age or English Learners born in the U.S.

Programs specific to newcomers are crucial to helping these students who often have a reduced time to learn English and earn their high school diploma before they turn 20 or 21 years old (depending on state regulations). The added assistance from these programs helps ensure secondary academic success and thus leads to more postsecondary education options (Sugarman, 2017).

Challenge: Newcomers

One frustration for immigrant students is repeating courses started or completed in their country of origin. When students immigrate to the U.S., their formal schooling is disrupted, which can negate previous learning in a classroom. Other students complete a certain grade level or even graduate in their country of origin but are placed at a lower level in U.S. schools because the curriculum does not match.

Hispanic Students' High School Graduation Rate Trends

Forty-four percent of immigrants in 2019 report having Hispanic or Latino heritage (19.8 million) (Batalova et al., 2021). In the fall of 2016, 77.2 percent of English Learners were Hispanic (3.82 million). For this reason, it is important to note that the growth in the national high school graduation rate continues to be driven by gains made by Black and Hispanic students across the country. In 2017, the national graduation rate for Hispanic students reached 80 percent for the first time, a milestone for the nation. Hispanic students also made higher yearly gains than the national average in 2019, increasing their graduation rate by 0.7 percentage point to 81.7 percent, as compared to the 0.5 percentage point growth nationally.

Seven states—Alabama, Delaware, Florida, Hawaii, Missouri, Texas, and West Virginia—led the way with graduation rates greater than 85 percent for this population. Twenty-four states and D.C. had graduation rates below 80 percent for Hispanic students, two of which (Louisiana and Minnesota) and D.C. had graduation rates below 70 percent. The national Hispanic-white graduation gap is 7.7 percentage points, a decrease from 9 percentage points in 2016, and 13 points in 2011. Twenty-seven states and D.C. have gaps larger than the national average, and D.C. and Maryland have gaps larger than 20 percentage points (NCES, 2021).

California experienced slight gains in its Hispanic graduation rate and Texas' did not change—two highly populated states, where half of all students are Hispanic, but Hispanic graduation rates are above 80 percent. It remains problematic that in states with substantial Hispanic student populations—such as Arizona, Colorado, New Mexico, and New York—Hispanic graduation rates remain in the mid-to-low 70s. The net result is that Hispanic students comprise 33.1 percent of non-graduates (ibid.).

Newcomer Programs

High-quality newcomer programs help immigrant students with limited English proficiency adjust to their new secondary school system. They can take the form of separate classes in a smaller environment or an entirely separate building in school districts with higher immigrant populations. These types of programs help students with English and native language skills and provide specialized classroom instruction. Many are short-term, until a student tests into an ESL program or the typical classroom (*Programs for Newcomer Students*, n.d.).

School Within A School Model

One interesting structure for newcomer programs that demands closer evaluation is the school within a school model. The school within a school model personalizes learning for students by providing them with additional supports and a small, safe community within their school.

One school district in Texas implemented a program in two of its high schools and one middle school to acclimate new students with a gap in their education of three to four years due to a transition from another country to the U.S. This 'school within a school' model places these students in a cohort for their four core subjects in classrooms co-taught by an expert content teacher and an ESL teacher. This specialized teaching meets students where they are—many need help learning how to use a computer—and although it is relatively new, the schools have already seen lower rates of absenteeism and higher rates of graduation for these students. The first cohort of students graduated in 2019.

Internationals Network

Internationals Networks has created 28 new schools to better support immigrant students in the U.S. They provide school support in three main geographic areas and offer professional development for instructors of recently arrived immigrants. They serve 9,500 students from over 130 countries and have a network of 500 teachers in 12 school districts. Internationals' students do better than other students in traditional ESL programs, graduating high school at rates about 4 percentage points higher than their peers. Additionally, they are 12 percent more likely to enroll in postsecondary institutions.

Postsecondary Attainment & Challenges

Postsecondary attainment and future success are closely connected.

Only 8 percent of the U.S. workforce has less than a high school education and 26 percent has a high school diploma. The other 66 percent of the workforce has some college education or higher (Loschert, 2016). In 2018, the unemployment rate was 3 percent for college-educated immigrants, lower than the 4 percent rate for those without a degree (Olsen–Medina & Batalova, 2020). Ensuring the educational attainment of the current immigrant population and their children is necessary for the future of the U.S. economy.

Although a postsecondary education is increasingly important for securing a job with sustainable wages in today's economy, 30 million immigrant-origin adults aged 16 to 64 do not have a marketable postsecondary credential. And, though the national average of immigrants without postsecondary credentials is 30 percent, the rate is much higher in 14 states including California (58 percent), New York (45 percent), and Texas (40 percent) (Batalova & Fix, 2019).

Moreover, immigrants who were educated in their country of origin face higher levels of "brain waste"—individuals with a bachelor's degree or higher working in low-skill jobs or unemployed—than native-born workers (23 percent vs. 18 percent, respectively). This can be attributed to difficulties transferring credits from a foreign institution and language barriers (Olsen-Medina & Batalova, 2020).

The benefits of postsecondary education are not exclusive to an associate or bachelor's degree. Adult immigrants with certificates instead of a degree still have higher labor force participation, higher incomes, and lower unemployment rates than those who have no credentials. This difference is especially clear among first-generation adult women with no high school diploma: 51 percent without a certification or license are in the labor force, compared to 83 percent who hold a nondegree credential. The median weekly wage among this same population is $925 for those who have a certification or license and $615 for those who do not (Batalova & Fix, 2019).

Postsecondary Attainment of Immigrant Adults

Postsecondary attainment of immigrant adults is highly variable. In general, immigrants are four times more likely than children of native-born parents to have less than a high school degree, but are almost twice as likely to have a doctorate (Waters & Pineau, 2015). About 22.4 percent have only a high school diploma and 32.7 percent of immigrants in 2019 held a bachelor's degree or higher, which is comparable to the native-born rate of 33.3 percent. Of those who recently immigrated to the U.S. (between 2014 and 2019), however, nearly half (48 percent) hold a bachelor's degree and higher (Batalova et al., 2021). This shows the postsecondary education disparities within the immigrant population based on their age upon arrival in the U.S.

Disparities also exist among subgroups within the immigrant population. In 2016, the National Center for Education Statistics released New *American Graduates: Enrollment Trends and Age at Arrival of Immigrant and Second-Generation Students.* The report's findings highlighted educational differences within the immigrant student population. In high school, college credits were earned by 41 percent of Asian immigrant students, but only 35 percent of Hispanic immigrant students. Furthermore, only 25 percent of Hispanic immigrant and 32 percent of Asian immigrant students enrolled in public 4-year institutions after high school (Arbeit et al., 2016).

Most immigrants without postsecondary credentials (12.9 million) graduated high school but did not further their education. Another 9.4 million did not graduate high school at all and the last 7.8 million dropped out of a postsecondary institution. Their demographics are 64 percent Hispanic, 15 percent Asian American and Pacific Islander, and 2 percent Black; 19.4 million are first-generation immigrants and 10.6 million are second-generation. Given the high percentage of Hispanic students who are immigrants at the high school and postsecondary levels, the importance of championing Hispanic and Latinx educational success is crucial.

Examples of Excelencia

Excelencia in Education is an organization dedicated to Latinx student success in higher education. Through research and programs, it provides data-driven analyses, promotes education policies, and organizes a network of Latinx professionals. One such program is Presidents for Latino Student Success, a group of college and university presidents and chancellors committed to fostering environments where Latinx students thrive. The program aims to reduce the equity gap and increase graduation rates for Latinx students. Institutions such as Arizona State University, American University, George Mason University, George Washington University, and Texas A&M have joined.

Each year, Excelencia in Education selects four programs as Examples of Excelencia in higher education. At the Associate level in 2020, Mi Casa Es Su Casa at Lone Star College–North Harris was recognized for their work in retaining Latinx students through active learning environments, academic and career support, and targeted coursework. These efforts have increased retention rates and three-year graduation rates in the program and overall institution.

Arizona's Science, Engineering and Math Scholars (ASEMS) Program at the University of Arizona was selected at the award's Baccalaureate level. The program is dedicated to helping STEM students with minority backgrounds graduate through supports such as one-on-one mentoring and career coaching. ASEMS has increased its first year and STEM retention rates.

Additionally, in 2019, Excelencia launched the Seal of Excelencia, a national certification for institutions that strive to go beyond enrollment to intentionally serve Latinx students. In its first two years, 14 institutions have earned the Seal of Excelencia for their intentionality and commitment to serving Latinx students and demonstrating positive outcomes for their Latinx students.

Postsecondary Disparities Among Immigrant Generations

Large disparities also exist among first-generation immigrant students' postsecondary attainment rates and their second-generation and later immigrant peers. Approximately 9.2 percent of students with an associate degree and 5.7 percent of students with a bachelor's degree were immigrants between 2012 and 2017. These numbers jump to 19.2 and 17.8 percent, respectively, for second-generation immigrants and 71.7 and 76.5 percent for students who are third-generation immigrants and up, indicating the additional postsecondary challenges for first-generation students (Pretlow et al., 2020).

U.S. Census Bureau data also show that young adults with foreign-born parents aged 18 to 19 years have a higher college enrollment percentage (52.8 percent) than foreign-born young adults of the same age (47 percent). This remains true in the 20 to 21 year age group, where the difference is 55.7 percent and 50.8 percent, respectively (*School Enrollment*, 2021).

Challenge: First-Generation Students

First-generation immigrant students face unique and additional challenges in the U.S. education system. Many non-immigrant students have a parent who has been through the college application process themselves or with another child. First-generation students must navigate the complex education system from high school to postsecondary institutions without guidance or advice from a parent. In fact, second-generation students are more likely to remain in school, attend full-time, and earn a bachelor's degree than first-generation students (Arbeit et al., 2016).

SkillUp

Upskilling through workforce training and increased employment opportunities can particularly help adult learners earn education credentials that increase labor force participation. SkillUp is a nonprofit organization leveraging their network to connect workers with education and job opportunities in a post-COVID-19 economy, including DACA and immigrant students. The SkillUp Together Fund is dedicated to helping place 27 million workers over the next 5 years. SkillUp has already helped more than 75,000 adults earn credentials, 87 percent of which are traditionally a minority in the healthcare and technology fields.

Many first-generation college students come from low-income families and tend to be disproportionately Black and Hispanic. College persistence rates for first-generation college students lag well behind their peers, especially for those who also come from low-income backgrounds (Balfanz et al., 2016). Research shows that in 2016, just 10.9 percent of low-income, first-generation college students had earned a bachelor's degree within six years of enrolling in college, and 26.1 percent had earned an associate degree or other credential, compared to 24.9 percent and 21.8 percent, respectively, of first-generation, non-low-income students. Non-low-income, non-first-generation students have degree attainment rates of 54 percent and 9.3 percent, respectively (*Pell Institute*, 2011).

Furthermore, over 60 percent of first-generation adult immigrants with no postsecondary education are considered English Learners and 30 percent are unauthorized (Batalova & Fix, 2019). Undocumented immigrants have much lower education attainment rates than documented immigrants, often due to additional challenges such as legal concerns, language barriers, and ineligibility for federal student financial aid. In 2018, 44 percent of unauthorized immigrants aged 25 and older had less than a high school education (Perez, 2014). Thirty-seven percent had a high school degree or some college education and only 19 percent held a bachelor's degree or higher. Of the bachelor's degrees given by postsecondary institutions in 2019, less than one percent were awarded to 'nonresident aliens' (*Table 322.20.*, 2019).

Challenge: Financial Pressures

First generation households have lower average incomes than households with second- and third-generation immigrants and beyond. These generations have an average poverty rate over 13 percent lower than first- and second-generation immigrants (*Children of Foreign-Born Parents*, 2016). Additionally, unauthorized immigrant students also face real-life financial struggles that can make prioritizing education nearly impossible.

Students must work to help support their family members or even pay those who helped them come to the United States. The inflexible structure of the U.S. school system makes it difficult to simultaneously work and attend high school. Even for immigrant students who highly value education, financial responsibility frequently outweighs education. Alternative schools are growing to help meet the needs of students who balance school and work.

Role of Community Colleges

Community colleges play a large role in postsecondary education for immigrant students. They tend to be more accessible and affordable, and they are one of the largest providers of English as a Second Language programs to

adults. Nearly one in four (24 percent or 6.5 million students) of undergraduates enrolled in community college are immigrants (*Educational Profile*, n.d.).

Many community colleges have adult education courses with convenient locations and flexible scheduling. One example is Miami Dade College. Miami Dade's Adult Education program offers GED preparation, individual tutors, advising throughout degree programs, English classes, and continued support beyond graduation. They have six campus locations and a hybrid classroom model that provides students with the college atmosphere.

Limited Data on Immigrants at Postsecondary Level

At the postsecondary level the National Center for Education Statistics only breaks out attainment data by race, gender, and age. The closest measure for immigrant students by NCES is "nonresident alien," which only includes non-U.S. citizens and is not further disaggregated by race or ethnicity. School enrollment data is available from the U.S. Census Bureau of students who are foreign-born and children of foreign-born parents, but this is not disaggregated by race or ethnicity and postsecondary institution type (i.e. 2- versus 4-year).

In addition, while 'English Learner' or 'English Language Learner' are common delineations at the high school level, the terminology for English Learners at the postsecondary level is further varied between 'Limited English Proficient,' 'English as a Second Language,' or even 'Linguistic Minority' (Nunez et al., 2016). This makes it more challenging to research this group, who often overlap with the immigrant community.

Despite these challenges, 5.3 million students (28 percent) from immigrant families attended U.S. colleges or universities in 2018 and accounted for 58 percent of increased enrollment since 2000 (Jordan, 2020). Black and Hispanic students have more than doubled their postsecondary enrollment rates since 2010, and low-income students' enrollment rates matched their middle-income peers for the first time in 2017 (Balfanz et al., 2016). The immigrant postsecondary enrollment percentage varies by state. For example, in California, students from immigrant families comprise 18 percent of college and university (*Immigrants and Education*, 2021).

Office of Career, Technical, and Adult Education Toolkits

The Office of Career, Technical, and Adult Education (OCTAE) at the U.S. Department of Education works to expand access to postsecondary education through community colleges to all young adults, including first-generation immigrants and those not yet proficient in English. The OCTAE also provides resources such as the English Learner Tool Kit and the Newcomer Tool Kit to help support English Learners (Uvin et al., 2016). Published by the Office of English Language Acquisition, the English Learner Tool Kit is a resource for state and local education agencies to help English Learners as required by ESSA. The Newcomer Tool Kit is for educators who work with immigrant students.

Additional Challenges and Considerations

Digital Divide

A U.S. Department of Education survey found that prior to the pandemic, teachers relied on digital learning resources to teach English Learners. About two-thirds of teachers report relying on digital learning resources, despite little professional development or training (Zehler et al., 2019). In an effort to support instructors, the U.S. Department of Education released a tool kit for teaching English Learners with technology, but this does not bridge the divide. Over 75 percent of surveyed teachers shared that one barrier to digital learning resources for English Leaners is little internet access at home (Westat et al., 2019).

Immigrant populations face deep digital divides. About 36 percent of native-born adults have high technology proficiency, compared to only 12 percent of immigrants. Additionally, only 5 percent of adults in English speaking households have no technology experience, yet 21 percent in households that primarily speak another language have no experience (Cherewka, 2020).

COVID-19 Pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic has disproportionately affected people of color, immigrants, and low-income populations in the United States. In many instances, this means that existing barriers, such as the digital divide, have increased exponentially. As classroom learning shifted to virtual across the country, students without internet access or devices at home were left behind unless they lived in a school district with a solution like WiFi hotspots (Cherewka, 2020).

Extended virtual learning is especially detrimental to English Learners and immigrants who do not speak English at home because they lose valuable face to face conversation that helps teach subtle language skills such as facial expressions and slang. This loss makes it harder to speak up in class, and reduces individual time with teachers—who are also struggling (Kim, 2020).

Data confirm that English Learners were in fact among the most affected students during the pandemic. Sixty percent of the 4.9 million English Learners (ELs) enrolled in K–12 have household incomes less than 185 percent of the federal poverty line. In addition, 700,000 ELs have disabilities, further complicating quality online instruction during the COVID-19 pandemic (*English Learners*, 2020).

Immediate identification is crucial to getting English Learner students the support needed to succeed in school, but this challenge was compounded by COVID-19. The U.S. Department of Education issued waivers for English Language Proficiency (ELP) assessments and EL identification for districts struggling during the pandemic. These waivers make it difficult for State and Local Education Agencies to support their EL students and help them graduate with the tools they need to be successfully prepared for the rigors of postsecondary education and the workforce.

Policy & Practice Recommendations

Create Culturally Responsive Schools

Culturally Responsive Education (CRE) creates a safer and more meaningful environment for marginalized students by including their background and knowledge in the classroom (*What is Culturally Responsive Education?*, n.d.). CRE has been shown to increase attendance, GPA, and course credits in high school—the very same indicators for postsecondary success (Dee & Penner, 2016). Cultural competency must exist at all levels in a school system for immigrant students to succeed in postsecondary and beyond.

An important way to promote CRE in schools is to translate materials into a student's home language. Immigrant and/or English Learner families have the right to request school communications in their native language, and schools and districts must comply. While larger school districts with higher immigrant populations may already have systems in place for this, smaller schools often struggle. Translations can be achieved through interpretation hotlines, translation apps, or partnerships with local organizations (Sattin-Bajaj et al., 2020).

Simply translating materials, however, does not fully support an English Learner or immigrant student and their family. High schools and postsecondary institutions must take additional steps to be culturally inclusive, such as encouraging learning in native languages at home in addition to English in the classroom. It is an unfortunate misconception that learning bilingually can impede a child's learning. Research in fact shows bilingual students may score equally well as their peers in assessments in their native language if English is not yet their dominant language. Students may also have different strengths within their languages and, as with any child, the more support they receive in and out of school in their native language, the more likely they are to improve across both languages (Hoff & Core, 2016).

Family-Centered Education

Family collaboration is another way to create Culturally Responsive Education. In addition to translating, online learning materials in native languages are one way to reduce barriers between a student's learning in school and at home with their family. Engaging with and increasing communications for immigrant and EL families have shown to boost attendance and homework completion rates (Sattin-Bajaj et al., 2020).

Collaborate on Academic Standards and Lesson Plans

Another way to promote cultural competency is to remove silos around English Learners. ESL teachers should be encouraged to collaborate with their colleagues on academic standards and lesson plans (Mavrogordato et al., 2021). Schools should increase professional development and training among all teachers, not just those teaching English Learners or immigrants.

Address Barriers to Balancing School and Work

Flexibility is also key to CRE. The rigid school structure and schedule is incompatible with immigrant students who must dedicate time to financially supporting themselves or their family. For many, this leads to dropping out of high school and reducing the possibility of a postsecondary education. Increased high school partnerships with adult education programs and community colleges can solve these issues.

Community College Consortium for Immigrant Education

The Community College Consortium for Immigrant Education (CCCIE) works to increase immigrant success in community colleges through partnerships with organizations, awareness and outreach initiatives, and the Promising Practices database, which allows community colleges to share ideas and data with one another. CCCIE's Blue Ribbon Panel brings together leaders and experts in immigrant education from over 50 community colleges that represent about 1.2 million immigrant students.

To help educators and policymakers achieve Culturally Responsive Education, New America has published a series of resources. These include core teaching competencies, reflection questions that can serve as a guide to setting CRE goals, and recommendations for creating inclusive classrooms. Increased cultural responsiveness is mandatory for higher quality K-12 education for English Learner and immigrant students. This in turn will better prepare them for the rigors of postsecondary education, increasing enrollment, persistence, and graduation rates.

Integrate Social and Emotional Learning and Mental Health Services

Integrating social and emotional development and mental health services are important for all students, but especially newcomers, including refugees, who have experienced volatile situations or are separated from their families for long periods of time. It is imperative that schools make an effort to understand that a student's situation prior to their U.S. arrival can have a big impact on their academic performance and behavior.

In 2016, Los Angeles County received more unaccompanied youth immigrants than any other county, and accordingly have strong social, emotional, and mental health supports. Los Angeles Unified School District's School Mental Health department offers universal options like therapy and counseling for the wellbeing and resilience of all students, and targeted interventions such as Responding to Racial Trauma and their Specialized Student Services program. The department includes social workers, therapists, and counselors, and offers professional development to school staff on trauma-informed care (Sugarman, 2017).

Expand Quality Dual Language Programs

Dual language programs teach academic materials to students in both English and their native language and have been proven to increase academic performance of participants. A RAND Institute study found that dual language programs in Portland, Oregon led students to score 13 percent higher on Reading tests than their peers and increase their English proficiency (Steele et al., 2017). Another study across 36 school districts in 16 states found these programs close the achievement gap between native and non-native English speakers. Additionally, in North Carolina, dual language program students outperformed their English-speaking peers (Collier & Thomas, 2017).

Dual language programs can begin as early as Kindergarten and have expanded to over 3,000 programs in recent years across 35 states (Mitchell, 2020). It is crucial for these programs to be high quality and long term to postively impact students. High-quality programs have assessment measures, offer professional development for staff, promote family and community engagement, and have robust support (Lindholm–Leary, 2005; Howard et al., 2017).

Increase Title III Funding

Title III is federally funded through grant programs and sub-grants to assist local and state education agencies (LEAs and SEAs) in achieving educational standards for English Learners and immigrant students (*Title III Grant FAQs*, n.d.). There are two Title III grant programs for these students. The State Formula Grant Program provides funds for EL students' English proficiency and accomplishment of state content and achievement standards in mathematics, reading/language arts, and science. The National Professional Development Program funds professional development of instructors who teach English Learners.

Eighty percent of the allocations to SEAs are based on EL population and 20 percent on the number of immigrants in the state. States then provide funding to LEAs, known as "sub-grantees." The law requires states to reserve up to 15 percent of their allotments for LEAs with significant increases in school enrollment of immigrant children and youth.

Title III funds are supplementary: they must only be used to provide additional services, staff, programs, or materials that could not be otherwise paid for with state and/or local funds. Funds can also be spent on family literacy activities, support for personnel, mentoring or career counseling, supplemental curricular materials, educational software/technologies, basic instruction services (such as classroom supplies or costs of

transportation), civics education, and activities coordinated with community-based organizations or institutes of higher education for immigrant children and youth (*Title III FAQs*, n.d.).

Prior to the pandemic, the population of EL students had increased 30 percent over the past two decades—but funding had only grown approximately 1 percent since 2009 (Progress Report, 2020). This has a direct impact on students. Funding under Title III was approximately $175 per student in 2002 (about $664 million total despite authorization of up to $750 million), but $150 in 2016, with English Learner and immigrant student numbers still rising (Williams, 2020).

Title III funding was increased in Fiscal Year 2020 by $50 million to $787,400. Though this is a step in the right direction, up to $884,960 was authorized (*Every Student Succeeds*, 2019). In practice, the amount of funding per student is stretched thinner in states and school districts with higher populations of these students. In California in FY 2020, funding equated to $114.40 per English Learner student and $104.70 per immigrant student (*Title III English Learner*, 2020).

Title III funding must continue to increase, especially given the challenges amplified by COVID-19 for EL and immigrant students and as districts and states innovate and report on what is effective in boosting outcomes for these students. This additional funding could be used for specific support such as extended education in after school programs, which have proven to help English Learners' academic success, or improved and targeted digital learning resources (Mavrogordato et al., 2021).

Normalize Native Language Assessments

Required standardized testing can be difficult for both English Learners and their teachers, who must prove the student has proficient subject knowledge, despite the test being in their secondary language. One way to navigate this challenge is to administer the assessment in the student's native language. This method, unfortunately, is not an option employed by many schools. Only 31 states and the District of Columbia offer native language assessments: most commonly in math and science, not social studies and reading. Moreover, some of these states offer native language assessments in languages that are not the most prevalent among their English Learners (Sugarman & Villegas, 2020).

Although ESSA requires states to offer native language assessments where necessary, it lacks guidance on how to do so. As part of the U.S. Department of Education's LEP Partnership, the National Clearinghouse for English Language Acquisition released an FAQ document around native language assessments in 2008. The more recent guidance, however, on Standards, Assessment, and Accountability listed on the U.S. Department of Education's website does not mention native language assessments.

Federal guidance would greatly aid the expansion of native language assessments. This could take the form of a tool kit or specific questions to address when drafting state ESSA plans. Collaboration at the state and local levels, especially with help from schools and districts with English Learner testing supports already in place, is also necessary to increase the use of native language assessments across the country (Sugarman & Villegas, 2020).

Expand Grow Your Own Teacher Initiatives

Grow Your Own (GYO) programs focus on increasing pathways to teaching for untraditional candidates in their communities—those who are highly invested and qualified, but do not have or cannot complete a four-year bachelor's degree. These programs offer a variety of support for potential teachers, including scholarships, mentoring, and flexible class schedules. Successful GYOs reduce teacher shortages and turnover, misalignment between teachers and districts, and language, cultural, and racial barriers between teachers and students through increased diversity.

There is a wide array of ways GYO initiatives are administered, but most require a local partnership between a school district and higher education institution, such as a community college. GYOs should be expanded at the state level through competitive grant programs. Educators can play a role in supporting immigrant students with

ImmSchools

Approximately 88 percent of K-12 educators report feeling unprepared to support undocumented students and their families, and less than 1 percent of school districts have policies and programs in place to support this group. ImmSchools, an immigrant-led nonprofit, addresses these concerns by partnering with school districts and educators to promote culturally responsive and holistic programs for undocumented K-12 students. Their 3-Pronged Approach focuses on professional development for educators, immigrant-centered workshops, and immigrant-friendly policies in school districts. School districts join a year-long partnership that incorporates four or more units of ImmSchools' curriculum. Since 2018, ImmSchools has trained over 5,000 educators and staff—of which 95 percent feel better prepared to support undocumented students—and has helped over 3,200 immigrant students and families.

the proper preparation, which includes being culturally responsive to their unique needs. These programs' success is evidenced by programs that have increased locally sourced teachers in California, Illinois, Minnesota, and Texas, among others (Muniz, 2020).

Improve Data Collection for Immigrant Students

The National Center for Education Statistics provides annual data on the Adjusted Cohort Graduation Rate for English Learner and Hispanic students but not for immigrant students. Accurate data is crucial for holding districts accountable and identifying the best supports for immigrant students. Likewise, State Departments of Education rarely report a high school graduation rate for immigrant students, frequently listing 'migrant students' in their annual graduation rate data updates. At the postsecondary level, NCES reports enrollment rates for "nonresident aliens."

Despite overlap across some of the reported populations, immigrant students face unique challenges in the U.S. education system, which can be further specified by first- and second-generation immigrants. NCES should report the high school graduation and postsecondary enrollment and attainment rates of first-generation and second-generation immigrant students, and by race and ethnicity, to allow for better analysis of their educational barriers and attainment.

Make Postsecondary Education More Accessible

One step to increasing postsecondary attainment rates of immigrant students is preparing them for the rigors of postsecondary coursework through greater access to college-level classes in high school. Immigrants and English Learners, however, access higher-level courses for college credits prior to attending a postsecondary institution at lower rates than their peers. In fact, they are often placed on a low-performing track in school because of their status. This is evidenced by schools with high Black and Hispanic populations offering high-level math and science courses at lower rates than schools with low Black and Hispanic populations, including Algebra II, Calculus, Chemistry, and Physics. Research indicates rigorous course-taking is one of the two strongest indicators for college success, leaving a disproportionate number of Black and Hispanic students unprepared for postsecondary success (Atwell et al., 2020; Balfanz et al., 2016).

Sixty-four percent of second-generation students earned college credit while in high school, compared to just 41 and 35 percent of first-generation Asian and Hispanic students, respectively. A college credit discrepancy also exists based on arrival age: 50 percent of immigrants who arrived as children take these courses, but only 36 and 15 percent of those who arrived as adolescents and adults do, respectively. Offering this opportunity would not only prepare these students for postsecondary success but also reduce time and financial burdens (Arbeit, 2016).

Even immigrant students who have access to college credits in high school may not be able to attend a postsecondary institution due to financial constraints. The average cost of tuition, fees, and room and board for the 2018-19 school year at a public 4-year institution was $20,598 and the average cost for a public 2-year institution was $11,389 (*Table 330.10.*, 2019). These high costs are stressful for many families, but especially immigrant households, whose average annual income was $64,900 in 2019, compared to the native-born household average of $69,474 (*Figure 1*, 2019). Additionally, the current maximum amount for a Federal Pell Grant, an education award for students with exceptional financial need, is only $6,495 (*Federal Pell*, n.d.).

Equal Opportunity Schools

Equal Opportunity Schools is an organization on a mission to ensure students of color and low-income students have equal access to IB and AP courses in high school through their multi-phase model, Action For Equity, and Equity Leader Labs. They have partnered with over 650 schools to identify tens of thousands of students and enroll them in rigorous classes that prepare them for future success.

Community colleges have been referred to as a gateway for immigrant students to postsecondary education, and some states have taken action in recent years to create tuition-free programs (Wisell & Champanier, 2010). Undocumented immigrants make up over 4 percent of postsecondary students in the U.S., however, they are barred from this opportunity in most states and less than half of states offer them in-state tuition (even those protected by the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals Act (DACA) (Redder, 2020; Smith 2019). More states should offer in-state free tuition programs that allow undocumented immigrants to participate, and allow undocumented immigrants to qualify for in-state tuition.

Conclusion

The evidence is clear: immigrants are a vital part of the culture and economy of America, but they are not equally valued in its education system. Providing immigrant and English Learner students with needed supports in high school will lead to higher levels of postsecondary attainment and future success. These supports must also be continued in postsecondary institutions, as there are additional challenges immigrant students face as young adults.

Educators and policymakers must create culturally responsive education environments, encourage English Learners to learn in their native languages, increase Title III funding, and make education more accessible. In turn, this will reduce education gaps between immigrant students and English Learners and their peers, and lead to a stronger labor force. It is time for our country to rise to the challenge of being more equitable.

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